

A political manager who will always be one

Naheed Khan, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's political secretary, talks cautiously to Azmul Haq after asking him why it was she he chose to interview, when "I had more than my share of unfair treatment." She was visibly perturbed and by the recent "onslaught by the Press". Finally she did agree to talk.

Are you actually as powerful as is generally perceived?

I really don't know, if being the political secretary to the PM. means being powerful! I am one of the many political managers of the PM. of Pakistan. I have been her comrade for many years. If that means being powerful, then yes I am!

You have lately come under a lot of fire from the press! Why?

You tell me, you are representing them. Why ask me? (Laughs!) I must admit that I can't pinpoint the real cause! My guess is that the idea of Political Managers is quite new to many of us. Some people probably can't digest the fact that a woman can be a good assistant to the country's prime minister. People fail to appreciate that I have been her political secretary for many years.

I have sailed through many testing moments with the party's chairperson and her comrades and done much political work since. My job is pretty well defined and I do it with dedication. I honestly don't mind criticism. Its 'slander' that upsets me! I feel women need encouragement to share responsibilities.

Are you enjoying the limelight?

Where is it? (Laughs) I am a political person. I have always enjoyed my work. I have an 18 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year routine! Political work is now the only thing is my life which matters!

I want to return to your relationship with the prime minister. It is said you enjoy an influence on her far greater than most of her cabinet members.

No that is not true. Benazir Bhutto is our leader and the PM. She has a team of advisors, cabinet members, party colleagues and political managers to revert to for any advice. My advice can only be effective in certain spheres of her multi-dimensional responsibilities as the prime minister and PPP's chairperson.

What is your educational qualification?

I hold a Masters degree in Biology from Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad.

When did you qualify?

In 1983.

When did you go into exile?

The same year! I did not want to leave my house. I was just forced to do so because of my active support for the PPP during my student days and because of my family's political affiliation with the party. We had given our home for the party's office in the early 70's and became a marked household, therefore!

Why were you selected as BB's political secretary in London? You were not the most prominent of the Party ladies!

This question should be directed at the chairperson. I was a very committed PPP worker. I was involved in political work even in London and my conviction in the cause brought me close to her.

As political secretary, what was your role in exile?

Political work, political liaison, political analysis and implementation of party policies.

Some of the party elders allege you have intrigued within the party to edge them out.

Nonsense! The PPP is a dynamic party. History has proven that one is a big name only within the party and "just a name" outside it! Frankly some elders deserved what they got.

Their role during Bhutto Sahib's trial was appalling. They just buckled under pressure! Others were probably just grew too big for their boots. But the party has a large heart. We have welcomed many of them back and they have realized their follies. You see one must never become a "Lota" in life!

You are in the task force on the New Social Contract. What is the latest on it?

It was not possible to overhaul a system in days but the determination to eradicate the ills within the system is there. We are committed to bringing the government to the doorsteps of the people and have finalised the first draft presentation of a "new system" which will be very



Naheed Khan

close to what we promised in our manifesto.

You are also in the PM's policy coordination committee? What exactly do you do there?

It is a 10-member committee to see that policies and directives from the PM are followed. We deliberate on various issues and make suggestions to the PM.

Is she a tough task master?

She is in love with Pakistan. She has dedicated her life to the betterment of her country and is a workaholic. Naturally she needs efficient support and it is her right to demand it! I have spent so many years in the PPP that this tough routine is now a part of my personality too!

It is alleged that you have worked in a travel agency during 80's and it was only after mal-

practice cases against you that you slipped away to London and took political asylum?

Now this is actually what I call baseless yellow journalism. I hereby solemnly declare that I have never been a part of any travelling business, anywhere in Pakistan. It is Common knowledge that 'the tyrant' and his 'martial law regime' had a pathological hatred for all of us. Many fictitious cases were fabricated against me and members of my family. We were forced into exile. Our years in exile and our struggle to restore democratic order in Pakistan has few parallels in modern history. We were proud of having dedicated our youth to restoration of democracy in Pakistan.

Your party MNA's, MPA's and other stalwarts complain of your total control over who gets to meet the prime minister.

How could this be true? The prime minister's military secretary takes care of all her appointments. I am in charge of the political work only. Even when the PPP was not in government, it was never a part my duties to look after the chairperson's appointments. She had a properly manned system to look after such matters.

You mean to say that you don't have anyone bickering against your "attitude" within the PPP?

How can that be possible? Who can ever get a 100% rate of approval? My effort is sincere and the majority of my comrades seem to understand this.

How do you handle in house criticism?

To tell you the truth it is far more painful when you get hit from within the party. I generally have a good rapport with the workers but the PPP is the largest political party in Pakistan and there are times when we cannot live up to the expectations of everyone. One must appreciate human limitations.

Is it true that you issue instructions to the cabinet members, MNAs etc.

This is absurd. I have no business to do that. I am a serious polit-

ical person and know how to work. My job is to help the prime minister in her party's affairs. She is the chairperson and issues instructions. We all have to implement the party's policies.

Why did the prime minister call you a 'Pillar of the State'?

She was misquoted. She called me a 'pillar of her party'. She considers all her colleagues pillars of the party!

What is your role in the affairs of Punjab PPP?

I have no direct role. PPP Punjab has an organisation which is functioning on well-defined lines. I only come in as a liaison agent and facilitator. My job is that of a coordinator between the party and its chairperson and I do not meddle in the affairs of the party anywhere.

You are often seen sitting in the parliament. Are you keeping an eye on the MNAs' performance?

(Laughs). Now this seriously has got to be a joke!

It is an allegation!

Who am I to keep an eye on public representatives? It is their voter's duty to keep a check on their performance. I am a student of politics. I like to know what is going on and therefore I keep myself abreast of political developments; within and outside the House.

Naheed Khan, where is the system heading to?

Towards stability!

Despite this polarisation and confrontation?

We are a young democracy. The polarisation you see is in reality teething trouble. We'll all soon realise that it is time to do some serious business. The people of Pakistan would soon reject this mode of "Siyasat".

What are your ambitions? What next?

I am a professional political manager. I have spent a life time in the PPP. I am here because of conviction. My past, my present and my future all lie here, within the party. I would like to continue contributing to the democratic process and to serve Pakistan from this platform.